# Democracy Fellow Empowers Citizens

## *with High-Tech and Traditional Media*

Just 45 minutes after returning to work from a recent trip to Mozambique, Troy Etulain got a phone call from a colleague. "Can you go to the Democratic Republic of Congo in three weeks? We need someone to look at public-private partnership possibilities with mobile phone companies."

The international development world is experiencing an explosion of demand for expertise in the use of technology to support social change, and this is keeping life busy for Etulain, a World Learning Democracy Fellow and a Senior Advisor for Media Development in the Office of Democracy and Governance at the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID.

The Democracy Fellows program allows experienced professionals like Etulain, a former Bloomberg News correspondent and Peace Corps volunteer in Russia, to design and evaluate US government assistance programs that support democratic development worldwide. Within the world of independent media, Etulain has a heavy focus on Internet freedom and new media. In this role, he is at the forefront of USAID efforts to explore the use of emerging technologies to support human rights and freedom of information in closed societies - such as those in Iran and China - that use increasingly sophisticated means to control the internet and erode global media freedom.



The Democracy Fellows Program has put Etulain at the forefront of USAID's efforts to support freedom of information in closed societies, such as Afghanistan.

Yet Etulain's work on media development straddles the line between the high tech and the traditional. He advises numerous departments within USAID and the State Department as they explore the potential for technology to do everything from mapping pockets of need in humanitarian crises to providing real-time information to discredit rumors that cause election violence.

## Building Community via Mobile Phone

One of the trends Etulain sees is the increased use of interactive voice response, or IVR, systems that provide a free, customizable menu of news and public information via mobile phones. For example, a user could listen to a requested sports update then hear a story about HIV/AIDS in her hometown, followed by the option to leave a message. The system can also be programmed to tell the user the number of AIDS patients nearby, letting her know that she's not alone and creating a virtual community.

"If the technology connects, empowers or protects them or helps make other people who are not part of the community aware of them and their potential, then it's doing profoundly new things," said Etulain.

The ability of social networking and mobiles phones to empower citizens to freely share information and create networks has profound implications for development professionals, especially those promoting basic human rights. Etulain likens it

# World Learning



Etulain has provided media development assistance to community radio stations throughout Africa, including Star Radio in Monrovia, Liberia.

to a transit system for information that has no defined hubs, making it harder for governments to censor and punish users.

## Demand for Journalistic Skills Grows

As more civil society groups use new media and seek to fill the information gap left by newsroom cutbacks, the demand for programs that teach traditional journalistic skills is growing. The team Etulain supports at USAID provides a variety of training services for journalists and civil society alike, including business management, story selection, objective reporting, guerrilla marketing, newspaper design and broadcast media production.

One of the most practical and common projects for USAID's media team is supporting community radio stations, with the goal of making their operations solvent and programming relevant to their audience. They often do this is by supporting public access programming, such as a call-in show that allows citizens to question their elected officials or covers topics that might not otherwise get airplay, like domestic violence or school dropout rates.

USAID applied this approach at the national level in Somalia, with radio journalists from different regions trained together to produce related content that was aired across of their stations. The targeted result gave Somalis national coverage and built regional media solidarity in a country fractured by civil war.

Sometimes even no-tech solutions make a big difference, such as in the case of Zimbabwe. Etulain has spent a great deal of time in the southern African nation that was scarred in 2008 by flawed elections and violence targeting the opposition. While some Zimbabweans can tune into USAID-supported radio programming, others cannot afford newspapers much less a radio or a television. One of Etulain's solutions was to simply post news on billboards in bus stations and other gathering places so that citizens stay informed and actively participate in debates about the nation's power-sharing government and efforts to expand political rights and civil liberties.

As a Democracy Fellow, Etulain spends as much time as possible learning about advancements in media and technology. The end results are more programs that empower people to take charge of their own development and expand their human rights, making for a more peaceful and just world.

**For more information** on the Democracy Fellows Program, contact **dem.fellows@worldlearning.org**.

## World Learning

**www.worldlearning.org/idp**

1015 Fifteenth Street, NW, 7th Floor, Washington, DC 20005  Tel +202 408-5420  Fax +202 408-5397
Email development@worldlearning.org

World Learning, a nonprofit education, training, and exchange provider, works globally to enhance the capacity and commitment of individuals, institutions, and communities to create a more peaceful and just world. Founded in 1932, World Learning runs international development programs, study abroad, and graduate education in more than 70 countries, with participants from more than 140 countries. US-based in Washington, DC, and Vermont, the organization has annual operating revenues exceeding $100 million.